



SOCIALISM AND THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Introduction: The New Sexism

Towards the end of the 1990s the term "post-feminism" became the phrase *du jour*. The huge changes that had taken place in the public and private lives of women over three decades led many to conclude that the struggle for women's liberation was over. Society, we were told, has entered into a "post-feminist" phase where women's oppression belonged to a bygone era, and ideas of women's liberation are merely outdated relics. Ideas of self-empowerment and improvement within the current system gained certain credence, especially amongst a layer of young women. Some went so far as to argue that the real problem was that the women's movement of the 1960s had gone too far and now needed to be reigned in. Right-wing newspaper columnists like John Waters and Kevin Meyers devoted hundreds of column inches to "feminazis" who created a "victim" consciousness among women by inflating statistics to exaggerate problems such as rape and sexual objectification. More often than not these claims were accompanied by derogatory comments toward anyone who dared to complain that women lacked equality. If you objected to any of these arguments or to the proliferation of sexist images in popular culture, you must be either a pro-censorship prude or an outmoded feminist born without a sense of humour. Natasha Walters summed up the mood of the decade in her 1998 book *The New Feminism* where she argued that the fight for women's liberation was essentially over: "We only have to put in place the conditions for equality for the remnants of old fashioned sexism in our culture to whither away", she wrote, concluding that Margaret Thatcher was "the great unsung heroine of British feminism".¹

Since the advent of the women's movement, over four decades ago, women's lives have been dramatically transformed. Women are visible in every aspect of public life today. They play an important role in the workforce; indeed it is difficult to think of an occupation in which women are not represented. They hold positions equal to men and, today, there are more women in third level education than at any other point in history. Changes in women's personal lives have been no less dramatic. Less than thirty years ago marriage was regarded as the only path to respectability for a

woman. Today, women have multiple sexual partners; they choose not to marry and to have children as single parents. Sex is something that is openly discussed in society, which, particularly in Ireland where sex was something shameful and repressed, is an enormous step forward.

Yet despite all these important achievements we have yet to see an end to oppression and sexism in society and achieve real equality between men and women. Forty years ago one of the core demands of the women's liberation movement was equal pay for equal work. Today, women in full-time work continue to earn 22 percent less than men, while women working part-time will earn 36.6 percent less than men. However that is not the full story as these averages conceal the reality of social class; when these figures are adjusted according to earnings we find that women in high-paying professional jobs can expect that pay differential to close to as little as 5 percent while women who work in low-paid jobs can expect to earn as little as 36 percent of men wages.

Access to free, safe and legal abortion had always been a hallmark of the women movement as control over one's body has long been considered to be one of the most basic rights. While there have been huge gains for women in this area across the world, Irish women, North and South, continue to be denied access to this basic right.ⁱⁱ In fact, Ireland has one of the most draconian abortion laws in the world with abortion being illegal in almost all circumstances including rape, incest and a risk to a woman's life. Figures for Irish women travelling abroad to access abortion are comparable with figures in most other European countries proving that making abortion illegal does not reduce the numbers of women who have abortions. Forcing women to travel abroad penalises working-class women in particular, who find it difficult to get together, in a short space of time, the large sum of money (€2000+) required to obtain an abortion. Between January 1980 and December 2009, at least 143,479 women travelled from the Republic of Ireland for abortion services in England and Wales.ⁱⁱⁱ An increasing number of women are accessing safe and legal abortion services in EU countries other than England. According to the Crisis Pregnancy Agency 331 women from the Republic of Ireland travelled to the Netherlands for safe and legal abortion services in 2008 and 451 women in 2007.^{iv} More than 50,000 women have travelled from Northern Ireland to England since the 1967 Abortion Act made

abortion legal there.^v Just as women in the South do, Northern women too give false addresses meaning this figure could be as high as 70,000.

Issues around sex are also still problematic. Despite the increase in women's ability to control aspects of their sexuality, there has been a massive increase sexist images in advertising and popular culture, the proliferation of pornography and the commodification of women's bodies. While the experience of this new sexism is uneven, its impact of young women is quite dramatic. As British socialist Judith Orr recently commented: "Many women who have fought for women's rights for decades will be aghast that it now appears that many of the gains that we made in the past are crumbling in the face of a shifting popular culture in which the objectification of women's bodies breaks new boundaries".^{vi} Today more and more women are recognising that the need for women's liberation is far from being antiquated, and that it is, in fact, thoroughly modern. While the arguments around the new sexism are depressingly familiar, the context of the debates is very different to the 1970s and 1980s and therefore requires a different political response.

The purpose of this pamphlet is not to evaluate the general position of Irish women today but instead to examine the rise of what has come to be known as "the new sexism" and to consider how best to win the battle against sexism and to achieve genuine equality between men and women.

I shop therefore I am: Feminism as consumerism

The feminist protests of the sixties and seventies against bras and high heels seem almost tame when compared to the extreme physical and sexual scrutiny facing girls and women today. A punishing beauty and weight standard has been established – pert, symmetrical features atop an anorexically thin body with large breasts – that is impossible to achieve without surgical enhancement. Women's magazines are full of articles telling women that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they'll have it all – the perfect marriage, loving children, great sex, and a rewarding career. Hollywood, celebrity culture, the advertising, music, and fashion industries, all promote these images of women.^{vii}

By comparing the changing images of women in popular culture with the changes in real women's bodies we can see just how much the gap between the ideal and real is growing. The beauty ideal has changed dramatically from the voluptuous Marilyn Monroe (size 12-14) to today's undernourished supermodel (size 2-4). Images of female bodies are getting thinner and larger breasted while real women are getting heavier, so achieving the ideal is ever more difficult. In the 1970s the average weight of a models was 8 per cent less than the average women, by the late 1990s models weighted 23 percent less.^{viii} Since 1951 due to changes in lifestyle and food consumption women have put on an average of 3 kg in weight, 4 cm on their height and hips and 16 cm on their waists.^{ix} The anthropologist Kate Fox estimates that the current desirable look is now achievable for less than 5 percent of the population.^x These unrealistic images of women permeate popular culture, negatively affecting the self-image of women and girls from a very young age. As a result of these airbrushed beauty standards, 85 percent of women feel dissatisfied with their appearance with reports suggesting that the average woman goes on three diets a year and that by the age of 10, almost 80 percent of girls have already tried to diet to lose weight.

As beauty ideals grow ever more extreme so do the beauty practices that stem from these anxieties. Increasingly women are turning to plastic surgery

to permanently alter their bodies to fit the demands of the beauty ideals. The most popular procedure is breast augmentation but the range of surgical enhancements on offer is expanding to include designer vaginas targeted at women who think that their genitals are unattractive or need to be “tightened up” after childbirth. In the US one of the most popular operations is known as the “pinnectomy”, a procedure that amputates the little toe to make wearing high heels more bearable. Women are increasingly made to feel alienated from their bodies and capitalism has not only created the conditions for this alienation, it has created a highly profitable market to service them. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the beauty, cosmetic and diet industries are assured of profits as women who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. The worldwide beauty industry is worth \$60 billion per year; the cosmetic surgery industry is worth \$31.7 billion annually; and most profitable of all, the diet industry, at an estimated \$150 billion per year (90 to 95% of dieters regain the lost weight).^{xii}

While unrealistic images of women are nothing new, there is something qualitatively different about how contemporary ideals of beauty and sexual attractiveness are manufactured and presented. The political and historical dimensions of women’s liberation have been co-opted and utilised by the system to justify the continued exploitation of women around the world. The American writer Ariel Levy, author of the 2005 best selling *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, describes the nature of this shift:

Only thirty years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were burning their bras and picketing *Playboy*, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing the bunny logo as supposed symbols of our liberation. How had the culture shifted so drastically in such a short period of time? ^{xiii}

One explanation for this is that the history and the language of women’s struggle to assert and define their sexual desire, to be understood as something other than decorative, has been packaged and sold to us as another commodity. Feminism is used for everything these days, except the fight for true equality, as almost anything can be considered ‘feminist’ – shopping, watching porn, prostitution, even war and occupation. Where feminism once argued for the emancipation of female sexuality, today it has

become the justification for “porn star in training” t-shirts for pre-teens. Where once teenage girls were subject to a staid, repressive sexuality which forbade any expression of their sexuality, they now face a paradoxical inversion of this repression, as self-worth and maturity are conceived in increasingly narrow and sexualised terms:

The marketplace is taking up and reinforcing certain behaviour in a way that can make it hard for many young women to find the space where other views of female sexuality and other ways for women to feel powerful are celebrated. By co-opting the language of choice and empowerment, this culture creates smoke and mirrors that prevent many people from seeing just how limiting such so-called choices can be.^{xiiii}

A remarkable similarity has emerged between ‘liberating’ feminism and ‘liberating’ capitalism’. As Nina Power argues, in *One Dimensional Woman*, “the desire for emancipation starts to look like something wholly interchangeable with the desire to simply buy more things”.^{xiv} Stripped of any political equality, feminism has become the latest must have accessory and sexual freedom has too often meant exploitation not liberation. Indeed, there is an uncritical assumption in contemporary culture and society that sex is, in and of itself, inherently liberative. Today’s hyper-sexualised culture swathes little girls in pink and leads women to believe that sexual confidence is the only confidence worth having.

Another (complementary) explanation is that over the past decade there has been a relentless seepage of the values, images, behaviour and dress from the world of selling sex for money into mainstream culture and society. At the core of this raunch culture is the objectification of women, sex as a commodity, and alienated sexuality. But those who create, consume, participate, and profit from raunch culture would have us believe just the opposite. They insist that strippers and porn stars, the magazines *Playboy* and *Maxim*, and TV shows like *Sex and The City* are empowering examples of women in charge of their sexuality. As Levy asks in her introduction:

How is resurrecting every stereotype of female sexuality that feminism endeavoured to banish good for women? Why is labouring to look like Pamela Anderson empowering? And how is imitating a stripper or a porn star—a woman whose job is to imitate sexual arousal—going to render us sexually liberated?^{xv}

This highly sexualised culture is tolerated even celebrated because it rests on the illusion of equality. Since men and women are equal, we are told that it is unproblematic that women should prioritise their sexual attractiveness, it is simply a free choice exercised by women equal to men. As Lindsey German argues "capitalism has an amazing ability to use the changes in society to its own advantage even if the capitalists or their supporters have done little or nothing to bring these changes about".

The commodification of sex

Capitalism in the twenty-first century has dramatically increased the objectification of women and the commodification of sex. Sex is used to sell everything from ice-cream to kitchenware. The global sex industry has grown tremendously since the 1990s. Precise figures are widely contested as information is difficult to obtain, but according to *The Economist* in 1998 the global sex industry was estimated to be worth "at least \$20 billion a year and probably many times that".^{xvi} That same year another study estimated that the sex industry was between 4 and 13 percent of gross domestic product in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Figures for the Irish sex industry are particularly limited as there been little research conducted in the field, although a 2009 study by the Immigrant Council of Ireland puts the figure at €180 million while acknowledging that the real figure is probably much higher.^{xvii} In the United States the sex industry is estimated to worth more than the major national sports combined – football, baseball and basketball – generating as much as \$12 billion in 2005. Between 2,500 and 5,000 strip clubs operate across the US. In 2005, the entire erotic dance industry in the US brought in approximately \$2 billion.^{xviii} Sex industry businesses with the capital to do so are diversifying to attract upscale audiences. So called "Gentlemen's clubs" are redecorating and going upscale, expanding services, and opening on site restaurants targeting the lunch and dinner business crowd. In Antwerp, Belgium, a new upscale 'mega brothel' opened in a legal red-light district in 2006, decorated by superstar architects and designers. In Las-Vegas a large upscale ultra modern "gentlemen's club"

was recently launched that at 4 a.m. becomes a swank ultra lounge with \$20 million state-of-the-art lighting and a unisex restroom.^{xix}

The sex industry has not only grown in a quantitative sense, it has also been normalised in an unprecedented way with pole-dancing and pornography becoming celebrated as outlets for a liberated and ostentatious women - as female sexuality becomes increasingly defined by the terms of the sex industry. Activities that were once viewed as oppressive to women such as lap-dancing are now accepted as mainstream leisure and fitness activities. Even prostitution has been subject to a profound normalisation through television and the media with the number of men willing to admit using prostitutes doubling between 1990 and 2000. It is difficult not to suspect that the rate would be even higher as our culture increasingly views women's bodies as little more than another commodity, like a car or a plasma screen television.

The growth of the sex industry has led some women to conclude that men are the problem as they are the main consumers of the sex industry. Those who support the abolition of prostitution often campaign, in the interim, for the criminalisation of men who use prostitutes, citing the case of Sweden where it is a criminal offence to buy sex. While this shift towards the criminalisation of men did result in a dramatic fall in street based prostitution it also saw a marked rise in prostitution via the internet. The difficulty with this approach is that it pushes women into darker less frequent areas and makes them more vulnerable. Women who work the street are the most marginal of sex workers and suffer the most by this approach. Moreover, criminalising men who purchase sex does little to address the reasons why women enter into prostitution to begin with. Nor can these issues be understood, or challenged, in isolation from other forms of violence and oppression, such as racism, restrictive labour and migration laws, and poverty. Focusing on male violence against women positions women primarily as victims, while giving power to male police and politicians to "protect" women from "bad men". It creates the idea of two opposing genders perpetually in conflict: man=male=aggressive versus woman=female=passive. It offers no analysis of, and therefore no effective political opposition to, the ways violence against women relates to other forms of violence that women and men experience. Moreover it defines

women's experiences of sex and sexuality exclusively in terms of fear and danger.

It is important to note that the social relationships that create the possibility of a sex industry are deeply ingrained in the structures of capitalism as human relationships are transformed into commodities that can be bought and sold. As Julie O'Connell Davidson argues "human beings are not born wishing to buy commercial sex services or visit lap dancing clubs, any more than they are born with specific desires to play the lottery or drink Coca-Cola. They have to learn to imagine that it would be pleasurable to pay a stranger to dance naked for them; they have to be taught that consuming such services is a signifier of the fact that they are having fun, a marker of their social identity and status as "a real man", "adult", "not gay" or whatever."^{xx} But in a capitalist society with its sexist social structures and rampant consumerism that is the educator, for women and for men.

Under capitalism, sex is turned into a commodity that can be bought and sold. It becomes abstracted from human relationships leading to alienated and contradictory expressions of sexuality. Women get caught in a double bind: they are expected to look a certain way but when they do, they are treated like a sex object.

Marx argued that a society based on exploitation leads to the most profound alienation of human beings from their natural capacities. There is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of class society; a tiny minority at the top control the means to life but this control is hidden behind the apparently impersonal working of the market. The very essence of human beings, their labour, is bought and sold according to market forces in the face of which they seem powerless. This process, Marx argued, influenced the totality of human life and experience, including our sexuality, the thing that is most personal and intimate to us as human beings:

Each attempt to establish over the other an alien power, in the hope of thereby achieving satisfaction of his own selfish needs...becomes the inventive and ever calculating slave of inhuman, refined, unnatural and imaginary appetites. He places himself at the disposal of his neighbour's most depraved fancies, panders to his needs, excites unhealthy appetites in him, and pounces on every weakness, so that he can then demand the money for his labour of love.^{xxi}

The consequence of this aspect of the system as indeed of all aspects of the system is huge alienation. It is not only a symptom of the most degrading and alienated aspects of life under capitalism, but also reinforces that degradation and alienation.

The problem with today's pornofied culture is that presents sex in a completely alienated and objectified form. Pornography today has become a mirror reflecting a society for which sex has become a commodity and in which women's oppression is still steadfastly locked into every facet of life. But as Shelia McGregor argues this mirror also distorts the reality: "Real people live dynamic lives: they talk to one another, argue and fight with one another and try to bring about change in themselves and others. Men and women influence one another."^{xxii} This is exactly the sense of dynamism and human interaction that is missing from pornography.

Feminism as Imperialism

A increasing commodification of sex and sexuality is not the only expression of capitalism in the modern world. There has also been a marked rise in imperialism and once again the ruling classes have attempted to justify their position by colonising issues of women's liberation. Indeed, today it seems that the language of women's liberation is being used for everything except the fight for true equality. The recent use of feminist ideas to justify war and occupation in Afghanistan and the persecution of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab or the niqab has been particularly disgusting.

The White House used the language of feminism very effectively in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002. In an Interview with the *New York Times* George Bush declared "The repression of women [is] everywhere and always wrong". He went on to argue that the West should attack Iraq for the sake of its women, proclaiming that "respect for women... can triumph in the Middle East and beyond!" Just as he had bombed Afghanistan the previous

year to liberate the women from their burkas (or, as he would have it, to free the "women of cover"), Bush took on the previously-unknown cause of Iraqi women, indeed women everywhere, to justify a further war and occupation.^{xxiii} As Hester Eisenstein remarked capitalist modernity has now become equated with the emancipation of women.^{xxiv}

This co-option of feminism by imperial gain is nothing new. For example, Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt (1883-1907) was convinced of the inferiority of Islamic religion and society, arguing that it was Islam's degradation of women, its insistence on veiling and seclusion, which was the "fatal obstacle" to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation". The Egyptians should be "persuaded or forced" to become "civilized" by disposing of the veil. (Interestingly when he returned home to Britain he founded and presided over the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage).

Similar arguments are used today in European countries like Spain, Belgium and France who justify banning of the veil by claiming that they are liberating women from patriarchal control. Indeed, throughout Europe there exists an uncritical assumption that any woman who wears the veil must, by the logic of secular reason, be oppressed. The assumption is that any Muslim woman who wears the veil or the hijab does so because of pressure. While some women may fit into this category, many Muslim women choose to wear the niqab or the hijab as a symbol of their identity, or for political (or other) reasons - and they are making a statement that they have every right to make. Indeed, given the nature of the debate you could be forgiven for concluding that it was only among Muslims that women's oppression still exists; that women in liberal democracies are free while women living in Muslim countries are in chains. Such debates consistently fail to grasp the common core of institutional oppression. The combined and uneven development of global capitalism has brought real contradictions to women around the world, especially in the Third World. Tens of millions are ripped from their traditional lives and driven into cities. These cities are dominated by a ruling class which extols the values and fashions of Western capitalism. At the same time they force through International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation agreements which further impoverish millions of people. In such conditions, some of the forces resisting imperialism argue that

"traditional" lifestyles—two parents, extended families, conservative dress and morals—protect women from the false liberation offered by modern capitalism. This argument is at its strongest in the Middle East, where US imperialism is sharpest.

In Afghanistan, as the US and its allies argued their armies would liberate women, the Taliban argued they protected women from the false liberation of single motherhood or the brothel. That is not to argue that life for Afghani women under the Taliban is not highly restrictive and oppressive: Women are forced to wear the all-encompassing burka, they are excluded from the vast majority of jobs, not allowed to travel alone and are denied access to education. Moreover, they are only considered half as worthy as a man in the eyes of local courts. However, women have never been simply passive victims of either side of these laws. Time and again women have shown themselves capable of transforming their own lives—often turning traditional women's roles into active resistance to imperialism or exploitation. In Iran, with the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, many women have looked to Islam and chosen to wear the veil but this has not prevented Iranian women playing an active role in all areas of public life. Women in Palestine have been central to both intifadas—organising the boycott of Israeli-owned business, reconnecting water supplies, organising mass protests at the arrests of men and joining the armed resistance. Today in Afghanistan, Iran, Egypt, Syria and Indonesia women, many of who wear the veil, protest and struggle against imperialism and exploitation.

A similar argument can be made about women in Western countries who wear the veil. Since the Gulf War in 1991 Muslims have been constructed as both the privileged object of Western imperial intervention – Bosnia, Darfur, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq – and, increasingly, as source of threat and terrorist conspiracies. In this context many Asians living in Europe, in particular, have adopted the label of Muslim as a basis of collective identity and political mobilisation. The French Marxist, Daniel Bensaid summed up the plight of people of immigrant origin who are pressed to assimilate themselves into a society that excludes them:

It is not surprising that some, accused of rejecting what is denied them, excluded from the universal, required always to prove their sameness and to locate themselves in the local landscape, nearly the same but always different, following the tested

stratagem of embracing the stigmata, should champion with pride the specificity that is imposed on them and command an anti-integrationist resistance. Unlike the colonised, the immigrant of second or nth generations cannot meet this requirement by a strategy of liberation aiming at national independence. He cannot even console himself with the idea of a return to his [or her] country of origin, often unknown, and sometimes associated with failure. He is thus condemned to remain a mutant, a pariah . . .^{xxv}

This passage suggests some understanding of the kinds of reasons that might lead a young woman of Arab origin in France or of Pakistani origin in Britain or Ireland, born and raised in these countries to wear a headscarf – not a symbol of submission to patriarchy but as a gesture of defiance, or, at the very least, as an assertion of an identity that she has chosen, rather than been imposed upon her. Increasingly we see plenty of cases of highly articulate and confident Muslim women asserting their equality with men while wearing the veil or headscarf. There are cases where women are forced to wear the hijab or niqab, or, more typically where the adoption is part of a broader acquiescence by these women in a subordinate position. However, as Alex Callinicos argues it is not accurate to claim that these conditions obtain universally; the veil can mean submission and confinement but why privilege this particular meaning?^{xxvi} Why target specifically this item of clothing inasmuch as it symbolises the subordination of women? As Alain Badiou argues: “Why is no one campaigning against crop-tops which arguably objectify and commodify the female body in a far more dangerous and pervasive way?”^{xxvii}

The origins of women's oppression

The most persistent and widespread explanation for women's oppression today is that of patriarchy. The term patriarchy generally refers to system of male power that is ahistorical and transcends history, class and society. It takes many different forms but as an idea it is so widely accepted that a wholesale rejection of the theory is greeted with genuine amazement. This is not surprising as Judith Orr comments; “the ideas of patriarchy have a hold because they appear to fit reality. The everyday experience of oppression is not abstractly imposed by ‘the system’. It is articulated through real human relationships between individuals.” Patriarchy, the cornerstone of a feminist theory of women's oppression is the view that men have historically and violently oppressed women. For example, Andrea Dworkin, a leading proponent of this thesis and author of many books on the subject of violence against women, writes:

In the intimate world of men and women, there is no mid-twentieth century distinct from any other century. There are only the old values, women there for the taking. The means of taking is determined by the male. It is ancient and it is modern; it is caveman and astronaut, agricultural and industrial, urban and rural. For men the right to abuse women is elemental, the first principle, with no beginning unless one is willing to trace origins back to God and with no end plausibly in sight.^{xxviii}

Theories of patriarchy see sexism not as a product of capitalism but as an “eternal truth” separate from the capitalist system. Such theories contain little understanding of the historical origins of women's oppression, of how the nature of the family has changed historically or, of how widely differing the experience of oppression is from class to class. Patriarchy theory supports the widely accepted notion within the women's movement that the fight for women's liberation is something separate from the struggle against capitalism. Since all men, consciously or unconsciously, oppress all women the primary division in society is not one of class but of sex. It is therefore important to recognise that relationships between men and women have not always been governed by violence and inequality and that they are subject to

social change. The Marxist approach to the question of women's oppression starts from a very different perspective. It is based on an understanding that it is the material world that shapes the ideas in our heads, not the other way round. Therefore any understanding of women's oppression must be rooted concretely in a historical analysis of particular societies, not in sweeping generalisations about human nature. Capitalism is the prism through which all of our sexual relations are currently distorted and this means that Marxists share with feminists a deep loathing of sexism and argue that women have yet to achieve genuine liberation.

Contrary to what you may often read, the question of women's oppression was no mere afterthought to Marx and Engels' analysis of class society rather it was, from the very beginning, an integral component of their work. Their theory of the origins of women's oppression was developed and refined over several decades culminating in the publication of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884. Engels wrote *The Origin* after Marx's death, but it was a joint collaboration, as he used Marx's detailed notes along with his own.^{xxix}

Marx and Engels' starting point in trying to understand the nature of human society was to examine the organisation of the production and reproduction of human life. While it is true to claim that there are aspects of early human society that we cannot know due to absence of written history, we can, by studying tools, bones, and other fossils, understand what distinguished our human ancestors from the apes. Firstly, it was their ability to plan their actions in order to gain greater control over nature. This enabled them to source the means of subsistence in different climates and circumstances – a process which Marx and Engels called labour or work. Secondly, the inclusion of meat in the diet meant that early humans could survive in a much wider variety of climates. As result human societies spread across the world. Thirdly, the need for planning and coordination of activities such as hunting in turn necessitated verbal communication, which led to the development of the larynx. Finally, tool-making required manual dexterity and intelligence, which led to the development of the hand and the enlargement of the brain. In other words, as Sharon Smith argues, human anatomy evolved according to the requirements of the labour process while, at the same time, the labour process advanced according to the evolution of human anatomy. As Engels puts it; "Thus, the hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product

of labour."^{xxx} This same course of development applies to human society as a whole.

Early humans lived in nomadic hunter-gatherer societies that sustained themselves by a combination of gathering berries, roots and other vegetable growth, as well as hunting or fishing. In most of these societies it was not possible to produce more than what could be immediately consumed by members of the band. With the development of more advanced agricultural production and the beginnings of settled communities, human beings were able to extract more than the means of subsistence. This resulted in the beginnings of the accumulation of the first surplus, or wealth. This was a turning point for human society because for the first time in human history there arose the possibility of one group living off the labour of others. This eventually resulted in the emergence of the first class societies over 6,000 years ago. Engels argued that the rise of class society brought with it rising inequality—between the rulers and the ruled, and between men and women.

As Sharon Smith argues the key to Engels' theory of women's oppression is the relationship between the sexual division of labour and the mode of production, which underwent a fundamental transformation with the onset of class society. In hunter-gatherer and early agricultural societies, there was no rigid sexual division of labour between women and men. In these societies women in fact provided the majority of the food. Nor was there a strict demarcation between the reproductive and productive spheres. Women would carry children with them while they gathered or planted, and the majority of goods used in these societies were sourced within the household. Because women were central to production in these pre-class societies, systematic inequality between the sexes was non-existent, and elder women in particular enjoyed relatively high status. This all changed with the emergence of private property.^{xxxi}

Only when it became possible to produce a surplus of food was society able to sustain a minority of human beings freed from the hardships of daily productive labour. This created the possibility (and necessity) of class society emerging, based on the subjugation of the majority to the minority. According to the sexual division of labour, men tended to take charge of heavier agricultural jobs, like ploughing, since this would have been difficult for pregnant or breast-feeding women. In addition, since men were traditionally responsible for the hunting of large animals, they oversaw the

domestication of cattle. Women, as the reproducers of society became disassociated from production and their role in society diminished. There is no evidence, nor is there any reason to assume, that men coerced women into this role. This transition to a society based on class exploitation involved important changes in previous egalitarian ways of living. A small minority of men had a direct interest in keeping this wealth for themselves and in ensuring that it was passed on to their offspring. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother right and they, therefore, gradually broke away from older kin ties. They created their own families that were established around rules of monogamy. These rules were strictly enforced for women but only hypocritically accepted for men. Engels argued that,

The overthrow of mother right was the *world historic defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the women were degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.^{xxxii}

And so,

'the first antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between men and women in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male' ^{xxxiii}

It was under these circumstances that the modern family began to take form. As Kieran Allen remarks, Engels important insight was understanding that the shift from a kinship system to a more private based family was both a 'great historical step forward' which opened the promise of relationships based on individual sexual love while simultaneously containing, in microcosm, the contradictions of the wider society.^{xxxiv} The essence of Engels' analysis of women's oppression is that the source of women's oppression is located in their reproductive role within the family and in the family's role as an economic unit in society. This argument opened the way to a more critical examination of the family and its role in shaping the status of women.

Capitalism and the Family Today

Today, in almost every industrialised country, the traditional male-breadwinner family model has been replaced with the two-income family model with both men and women working outside the home. However, this has not produced greater equality for women, indeed, it has created a whole new set of burdens. The modern woman is now supposed to be some kind of superwoman who has a successful career, happy well cared for children and a sexually satisfied partner. For working-class women this creates a double burden, in which they return home from work at the end of the day only to face all of their family responsibilities. Unlike middle class women who can afford to pay for someone to take primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, working-class women are expected to work outside the home and care for children.

In order to understand why this is the case we need to recognise the vital economic and ideological role that the family continues to play for capitalism. Economically, the family is the site where the next generation of workers are fed, clothed, socialised, educated, loved and cared for to ensure that they turn into the next generation of workers. The family is also an important unit of consumption. The family also plays an important role ideologically under capitalism with the media and politicians holding up the nuclear family as the ideal way to live our lives.^{xxxv} Think of British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, infamous claim: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."

However, it is not enough to simply argue that the family only has a political and economic function in society. Indeed, most people consider their family to be centrally important in their lives. The family can be the one place where we can expect and receive unconditional love and support and functions, for many, as a haven from a brutal world. This experience can be contradictory as family can also be a site of much unhappiness and even violence. Domestic violence accounts for a significant portion of recorded violent crime in Ireland. The most common scene of murder is the home. Women who are raped are more likely to be attacked by someone they know – often within

the home. The physical and sexual abuse of children is also more likely to happen inside the home than outside.

None of this should be particularly surprising as the family is an institution based on hierarchical relationships and sexual repression. The family promises happiness and safety, but frequently it delivers insecurity and sadness. It is seen as a haven from the outside world but it cannot be a genuinely secure retreat. Pressures on the family, from unpaid bills to unemployment, from problems of parents working shifts to difficult relationships, all impinge upon it. This is also why there is so much concern over "family breakdown". The capitalist state intervenes to prop up the family, financially through family credits and other allowances, and directly through a series of professionals connected to health, education and welfare. The "breakdown of the family" – the rise in statistics for divorce, the decline of marriage and the increase in women having children outside marriage – is used by right wing politicians to explain problems ranging from violence to obesity.^{xxxvi}

Yet marriage and a family are still portrayed as the ultimate aspiration for women. Despite generations of women being a part of the workforce, the home is still assumed to be the woman's sphere. It is the woman who must juggle work, shopping, housework and childcare in order to fulfil society's expectations of her "natural" role. The state supports and reinforces this "traditional" view of gender division, with men also expected to fulfil expectations of being the provider. Women have children later than ever before and increasing numbers actively choose not to have children. But as Judith Orr remarks "while traditional ideas about the family do not fit the reality of society today, their resilience reflects the fact that the it has survived as a dominant social structure, despite many profound changes in how we live and work. It serves an important purpose in maintaining and justifying the status quo."^{xxxvii} This is the material bedrock for the ideas about women that permeate society.

Socialists and Women's Liberation

Many feminist writers accuse Marx and Engels of "economic reductionism", meaning that they reduce all social questions, including women's oppression, to class relations. The accusation usually rests on the false assumption that Marxism subordinates women's oppression to the more important arena of the class struggle. The underlying assumption is, of course, that the root of women's oppression is at least partly personal in nature, and unrelated to class society—a product purely of the unequal personal relationships between women and men. Eleanor Leacock makes the point, "In western academic circles second-hand knowledge of (or assumptions about) Marxist ideas are legion, but Marx's and Engels' works are all too seldom read. The usual practice is to set up as Marxist theory the straw man of economic determinism and then to knock it down."^{xxxviii} Feminists argue that Marxism cannot explain the more personal aspects of women's oppression because it locates the root of women's oppression in class society. This is a caricature of Marxism, which assumes that Marxists only concern themselves with exploitation at the workplace. Marxists stress the economic roots of inequality precisely because we seek to understand how seemingly different forms of oppression have come to play a crucial, and often interdependent, in maintaining a system of exploitation.

It is not possible to understand the full impact of women's oppression if you attempt to see it in isolation from class. However, that is not to argue that oppression can be reduced to class. All women experience oppression under capitalism but not all women experience oppression in the same way. Class shapes the very real material differences between the experience of oppression of someone like Mary Harney and a working class woman working in a hospital or factory. Upper-class women can escape the worst aspects of sexism in society. Indeed, increasingly a small number of women can have successful professional careers precisely because a working class women or a migrant woman is caring for her children and taking care of domestic chores.

Far from ignoring the personal aspects of women's oppression, Engels laid out the theoretical framework for understanding them and incorporated into his analysis all aspects of women's oppression—including domestic abuse, the

alienation of sexuality, the commodification of sex, the drudgery of housework, and the hypocrisy of enforced monogamy. Most importantly, he emphasised the inequality between women and men within the family. Moreover, as Sharon Smith argues, he did so in the Victorian era, when such ideas were far less commonplace than they are today in the aftermath of the women's liberation movement.^{xxxix} As the following passage makes clear, Engels' method not only opened the door to understanding women's oppression, but also put forward a vision of women's liberation, which has continued both to inform and inspire successive generations of socialists since his time:

What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual—and that will be the end of it.^{xi}

In order to achieve this vision of true equality between men and women we have to fight for an alternative to capitalism because as Hester Eisenstein argues "a vision of justice for women and all humanity cannot be realised within the violent and dangerous machinery of corporate globalization".^{xii} Therefore it is time for the women's movement as a whole to align itself with the struggle for alternative to the current economic world order.

The increasing sexualisation of society is intrinsically linked to capitalist exploitation and fighting sexism therefore cannot be something separate from class struggle; it must be an integral part of it. While all women workers suffer oppression and exploitation they are also part of a

powerful force, the working class. We need a politics that does not separate out women's struggles from the wider struggle against the capitalism system. We have to make our struggles reflect women's aspirations and demands and make these demands part of the wider struggle against capitalism.

Notes

ⁱ Natasha Walters, *The New Feminism*. London: Little Brown, 1998, 175.

ⁱⁱ For a more detailed discussion on abortion see Goretti Horgan, *Abortion: Why Irish Women must have the Right to Choose*. Dublin: Socialist Workers Party, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Irish Family Planning Association <http://www.ifpa.ie/eng/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics>

^{iv} See Crisis Pregnancy Agency report <http://www.crisispregnancy.ie/pressrelease.php?id=112>.

^v For a more detailed breakdown of figures see the UK Department of Health statistics http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsStatistics/DH_099285

^{vi} Judith Orr, "Marxism and Feminism Today". *International Socialism Journal* 127, Summer 2010, 27.

^{vii} See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of beauty are used against women*. London: Vintage, 1991.

^{viii} Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy, Courtney E. Quinn & Julia Zoino, "The Mass Marketing of Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders: The Social Psychology of Women, Thinness and Culture", *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2006, 208-24.

^{ix} Nancy Etcoff, Susie Orbach, Jennifer Scott & Heidi D'agostino, *Beyond Stereotypes: Rebuilding the Foundation of Beauty Beliefs – Findings of the 2005 Dove Global Survey*. New York: StrategyOne, 2006.

^x Kate Fox, *Mirror, Mirror: A Summary of Research Findings on Body Image*. Oxford: Social Research Centre, 1997.

^{xi} Rachel Williams, "Cosmetic Surgery and Treatments set to hit £1bn a year". *Guardian*, 19 December 2007.

^{xii} Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005, 3.

^{xiii} Natasha Walters, *Living Dolls: The Return Of Sexism*. London: Virago, 2010, 119.

^{xiv} Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman*. London: Zero, 2010, 27-28.

^{xv} Levy, 4.

^{xvi} "Giving the customer what he wants", *The Economist*. 12 February 1998.

^{xvii} "Globalisation, Sex Trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland" Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009. Available at <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010>

^{xviii} Barbara G. Brents and Kathryn Hausbeck, "Sex Work Now: What the Blurring of Boundaries around the Sex Industry Means for Sex Work, Research, and Activism" in *Sex Work Matters Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry*, Melissa Hope Ditmore, Antonia Levy & Alys Willman eds. London: Zed Books, 2010, 14.

^{xix} Ibid, 15-6.

^{xx} Julie O'Connell Davidson cited in Prichard, 178.

^{xxi} Karl Marx cited in Jane Prichard, "The Sex Work Debate". *International Socialism* 125, Winter 125, 170.

^{xxii} Shelia McGregor, "Rape, Pornography and Capitalism". *International Socialism* 45, Winter 1989, 3-31.

^{xxiii} George Bush cited in Katharine Viner, "Feminism As Imperialism" *Guardian*, 20 September 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/sep/21/gender.usa>

^{xxiv} Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced*. New York: Paradigm, 2009, 13

^{xxv} Daniel Bensaid cited in Alex Callinicos, "Marxists, Muslims and Religion: Anglo-French Attitudes". *Historical Materialism* 16, 2008, 155.

- ^{xxxv} Callinicos, 156.
^{xxxvi} Alain Badiou, *Hijab*. Paris: Pétroleuse, 2004.
^{xxxvii} Andrea Dworkin, *Men Possessing Women*. London: The Women's Press, 1981, 68.
^{xxxix} Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers, 1972.
^{xxx} Sharon Smith, "Engels and the Origin of Women's Oppression". *International Socialist Review*, 2, Fall 1997 http://www.isreview.org/issues/02/engels_family.shtml
^{xxxii} Ibid.
^{xxxiii} Engels, 120 - 121.
^{xxxiv} Ibid., 129.
^{xxxvii} Kieran Allen, *Marx and the Alternative to Capitalism*. London: Pluto, 2011, 81-2.
^{xxxviii} Lindsey German, "Women's Liberation". *International Socialism* 101, Winter 2004.
^{xxxix} <http://www.isi.org.uk/?id=32>
^{xl} Lindsey German, "Is the Family a Haven or a Hell". *Socialist Worker*. 25 Nov 2008.
^{xli} <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=16503>
^{xliv} Orr, 48-9.
^{xlvi} Eleanor Burke Leacock cited in Chris Harman, "Women's Liberation and Socialism"
^{xlvi} Ibid.
^{xlvi} Sharon Smith, "Engels and the Origin of Women's Oppression".
^{xl} Engels, 43.
^{xli} Eisenstein, 13.

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We are told society has entered into a "post-feminist" phase where women's oppression doesn't exist, and ideas of women's liberation are merely outdated relics. Some go so far as to argue that the real problem is that the women's movement of the 1960s has gone too far. In reality we haven't gone far enough!

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It is not possible to understand the full impact of women's oppression if you attempt to see it in isolation from class. Upper-class women can escape the worst aspects of sexism in society. There is a very real material difference between the experience of oppression of someone like Mary Harney and a working class woman working in a hospital or factory.

Therefore to achieve true equality between men and women we have to fight for an alternative to capitalism because justice for women and all humanity cannot be realised within the violent and dangerous machinery of corporate globalization.

It is time for the women's movement as a whole to align itself with the struggle for alternative to the current economic world order.

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